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ABSTRACT

As the demographics of higher education, the role of higher education in society, and society itself all change, graduate education in English will inevitably change. The functions of graduate study in English are to prepare (1) teachers of English, (2) scholars who can advance critical theory and the understanding of language and the writing process, and (3) the next generation of literary critics. In recent years, however, the supply of advanced degree graduates has exceeded demand, leading to the question of whether the number of institutions allowed to offer graduate study in English should be limited. Obviously, it is time to rethink what graduate education in English can and should be. For example, graduate programs could be designed to prepare students for careers such as creative writers, to give students general pleasure in gaining the knowledge, or to provide students who spent their undergraduate years in accounting, engineering, or other overspecialized fields with a less specialized graduate program. Graduate study in English must escape elitism and turn back toward the real world if it is to be of any value. (HOD)

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Graduate Education in English: Whither and Why?

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There's an old saying that generals are always preparing to fight the last war, instead of the next one. To an extent, perhaps we in the colleges and universities are guilty of the same error. After the turmoil of the late sixties and early seventies, we have to a surprising extent gone back to the same practices and values we used before the time of "reform." We are doing business in the same old way, all under the guise of "moving into the eighties," when we are really moving back into the fifties.

One of the tragedies of our most recent romantic age, it seems to me, has been that the deliberate outrageousness of the most radical reformers created a backlash that still cripples responsible efforts at genuine reform. In the mid to late sixties, higher education was ready for much needed reform, and true reformers were gaining influence. Now, in the mid eighties, the backlash has settled us back into many of our old ruts. The Marcusian screwballs cost us a rare opportunity for beneficial change.

Still, that should not stop us from continuing to try. As the demographics of higher education change, as the role of higher education in our society changes, as society itself changes, graduate education in English will inevitably change. The question is not whether, but how. Will we continue to find a significant part to play in higher education in this country, or will our roles decline and disappear? I suspect

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that some graduate programs in English will do the one, and some will do the other. And there will be some few which, like John Partridge, will go on protesting that they are alive long after some Swiftian Isaac Bickerstaff has proven they are dead.

Please don't misunderstand my purpose in asking such questions. I do not pretend to have a clear set of answers, or even a general prescription for how we should march triumphantly into the future. I am most definitely not an advocate of comprehensive planning. If anything, I oppose such activities. Let me illustrate.

Many years ago, when NCTE met in Las Vegas, I was asked to participate in a session that was supposed to debate whether the profession should arbitrarily limit the offering of the Ph.D. in English to a few of the largest and longest established programs in a few of the larger and more prestigious universities. The argument in favor of such a Draconian measure was that the job market for Ph.D.s in English was shrinking and so, like an automobile assembly line, we should cut production to match the "market." The debate format for this session was supposed to be two speakers in favor of the proposition and two against, with an impartial moderator. I was one of the two asked to speak against the proposition.

Such was the strange irrationality of the times that the supposedly impartial moderator began the session not with the introduction of the question and then of the first speaker, but rather with a presentation of his own views in favor of the proposition. His remarks were followed by one of the speakers in favor of the proposition. Then my colleague in opposition, or so he was designated in the program, began his presentation. I expected at last to hear something said for the

opposition. He began by acknowledging that he had been asked to present an opposing viewpoint, but he really didn't agree with it, so he was going to speak, also, in favor of the proposition, which he did.

The chair applauded his switch of sides and introduced the next speaker, also in favor of the proposition. I was beginning to feel lonely.

I came last, and apparently least. Controlling my astonishment at the way the session was being handled, I presented my lonely opposition to the idea of restricting graduate study in English to a few arbitrarily selected schools. My argument was that graduate study needs to be open to reform, to new ideas, to alternative approaches. If Ph.D. programs were restricted to only a few of the traditional, well established schools, there would be no pressure for change. The select few would be the only game in town and could do whatever they pleased, regardless of the needs of their students or of the institutions that might employ their graduates, or of society.

At the end of my presentation, the moderator asked the audience of some forty people how many favored the proposition. To my delight, only one hand went up. "Well," the moderator said, "I see we still have some disagreement on this subject."

We still do. I still very much oppose the planners and the vocational prognosticators, not only because they are almost always wrong, but also because they almost always present too narrow a view of what graduate study in English should be, and far too narrow a view of the possible reasons for doing graduate study. As the days of prosperity and expansion in higher education have vanished, and as demography, the economy, and the public mood have all shifted, we have

taken various and sometimes painful short-term measures to adapt. Now, while the air is filled with studies, reports, critiques, and views with alarm, we are actually beginning to take a longer view of who we are and what we are up to -- or should be up to. In this utilitarian age, the question will not be out of place if we ask, what is graduate study in English for, anyway?

For college teachers of English, the most obvious answer is that graduate study in English produces teachers of English. We teach our graduate students so that they can follow in our steps, and perhaps a bit beyond. We are, in effect, reproducing ourselves intellectually. This is a worthy activity because we and our intellectual offspring also teach undergraduates -- or at least most of us do. I trust that for English teachers I need not fill out the argument for teaching composition and literature to undergraduates. Creating new teachers in our image assures succeeding generations the same advantages of education that our students have.

Graduate study, particularly at the doctoral level, also prepares scholars who can continue to advance our critical theory, our bibliographical scholarship, our understanding of language and the process of writing, and all the other areas open to investigation by English scholars. The advance of our knowledge requires continuing generations of such people, and we must provide them.

Graduate study prepares the next generation of literary critics to help us interpret -- and reinterpret -- our literature. The more esoteric theoretical critics may speak primarily to other critics and so serve a limited audience, but theory does finally affect more popular criticism and thus reaches a broad audience indirectly. And of course

the critics who help to make literature more accessible to all readers provide a service both to literature and to the public in general. This serves the cultural development of our society, if that does not sound too high flown.

And of course graduate study, especially at the master's degree level, prepares many of our public school teachers for their profession. Again, I presume there is no need here to demonstrate the value of having our public school teachers well grounded in language and literature.

The case for all of these functions will be too well known to this audience to require detailed development. These are all accepted functions of graduate study in English, and they are all valuable, but the demand for people in these fields has declined in recent years, or rather, the number of people in these fields has exceeded the number of positions open. With fewer openings, should we simply reduce the rate at which we award graduate degrees in English? Should we shut down programs and refuse to admit more students than there are projected jobs for teachers, scholars, critics? Should we return to the proposition discussed in the Las Vegas meeting and limit the number of institutions allowed (allowed by whom was never made clear) to offer graduate study in English?

No, we should not do any of these things, for more good reasons than I have space here to present. Let me offer a quick outline, however, of a few of them.

First, there are many more kinds of work for advanced graduates of English than our placement offices would have us believe. For example, there is the occupation of writing (as contrasted with the teaching of

writing). Although conclusive proof is difficult, one might make a persuasive case that graduate study in English would help a student prepare for a career as a creative writer, often of course associated also with teaching creative writing. But there are other kinds of writing for which one can get paid, sometimes rather handsomely. There are many who make a living writing non-fiction prose that is not strictly news-journalism (Tom Wolfe comes to mind). Advanced knowledge of language, literature, the process of writing should help such people prepare for their careers, too. Do we have graduate programs that might speak to the needs of people interested in such careers? Very few. Perhaps this is an area we should consider more carefully as we design our graduate courses and curricula.

The pendulum of scholarly fashion is beginning to shift back in the direction of respectability for the study of non-fiction prose. Emerson and Thoreau may turn out not to have been anomalies, after all, but part of a long, rich literary tradition that continues today. The essay may again appear in respectable English textbooks not intended only for freshman composition classes. The graduate program that gives a student opportunity to pursue such studies and to gain skills in such writing may become popular and useful. We should attend to this possibility.

Finally, let me mention again a concept that has become increasingly foreign to our thinking in higher education, and most particularly at the graduate level. I hesitate to bring it up, but some of my older colleagues may remember a less puritanical time when someone might want to do graduate work in English just for the pleasure of gaining the knowledge. Not to prepare for any special job slot. Not to get ahead of anyone, or to keep from falling behind anyone. Not even as

an investment to be paid off in future enhanced earnings. Just for the fun of it, for self satisfaction, increased awareness, enhanced understanding.

Perhaps we should consider such a possibility. We have worried for years about what to do with increased leisure time. Graduate study in English may not be up there with watching celebrity bowling or running until your knees break down, but there may someday be a fair number of people who would enjoy doing it just for fun. Who are we to say that being an educated amateur is not acceptable for a consenting adult? Perhaps someday the word "dilettante" will even shed its current negative connotation in this age of intent expertise.

An obvious aspect of such a development is the expected — or at least much hoped for — increase in older students in higher education. The so-called non-traditional student. Some of these people only wish to increase their skills in their chosen field. Some wish to "retread" themselves into competence in a new career field after their first one no longer has interest or perhaps offers opportunity for them. But some have merely found a desire to know more about themselves, their society, the world around them. For many of these, a liberal program at the graduate level in English language and literature might best fit their needs.

I must say that as a teacher I look forward with great hope to a graduate student body liberally salted with such people. Anyone who has taught literature to tradional age college students and also to older students will know how much these older students can add to a class. I sometimes wonder if some literature should not be taught at all to anyone under thirty, but should be saved for older students. Consider

Katherine Anne Porter's "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall," or Somerset Maugham's "The Outstation," or even E. B. White's little essay, "Once More to the Lake." These are fine pieces of writing, but they require of their reader some level of mature experience to be fully understood and appreciated. But to get back to my point, legitimate graduate study should be made available and encouraged for older people who have some of the older reasons for wanting to learn.

Perhaps, too, we should have a less specialized graduate program for the thousands of victims who spent their undergraduate years studying excessively narrow programs in accounting or engineering or some other overspecialized trap for good minds. Should we develop a "liberal studies" master's program that recognizes the intellectual level and maturity of these people but also allows for their limited knowledge?

An essential ingredient in such shifts in the focus of what we do at the graduate level, of course, will be to rethink our priorities and our hierarchies of value, and of reward, in academe. Among our colleagues, to whom do we give the greatest recognition and the most tangible rewards? Nowadays the greatest prestige — in fact almost the only prestige —is given the Ph.D. and the institutions that grant it. Within the profession, the narrow specialist who writes much and teaches few students, whose range of study is narrow, and who has no personal allegiance to anything but his or her own career, is too often the person most recognized and most rewarded. The generalist, the gifted popularizer, the teacher who can help students cross the lines between literature and their own lives, or who can help students learn to express their own lives effectively, well, such people do fill

classrooms and keep the student credit hour production up. But they will probably retire as instructors or assistant professors. There is, perversely, tragically, a deep disjunction between what higher education can and needs to do for the society that supports it and what higher education will reward its faculty for doing.

We need to rethink some of these values. A good master's program can be something besides either a way station to the Ph.D. or a consolation prize for those who won't make it all the way. It can be a worthy goal in a worthy program. And the institutions that offer such degrees should be valued. In terms of recognizing and rewarding our colleagues, the "good soldiers" of our profession, the ones who take the time to chair and record and otherwise help out at professional meetings, serve on professional committees, and take care of the many other responsible housekeeping chores of academe, may well be contributing more to the profession than some of those who only present papers and refuse to give their valuable time for the drudgery of making our world operate. We should value and reward such service more highly. The good teachers who can genuinely show how literature relates to life should be valued and rewarded. The popular critic who can make a work of literature more readily available to the public, and who can write clearly and persuasively enough to hold the public's attention, should be valued. We should try to produce more such people as these, instead of seeking ways to become more esoteric and isolated from society. Certainly our narrowest specialists have their place and value in the scheme of things, but we should not make mandarins of them and coolies of the rest of us, as I fear we have generally done.

In short, what I am saying is that graduate study in English has traditionally fallen into an arrogant elitism that is probably not survivable for much longer. If we are to escape becoming professional troglodytes with no real reason to exist, other than our own high opinion of ourselves, we must broaden and rethink our ideas of what graduate education in English can and should be. If we can escape that elitism and turn back toward the world, there is much of great value that we can do, and a high likelihood that we will survive to do it.

Presented at the College English Association session of the annual meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English, November 1985.